

SOMETHING IN THE WAY

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By

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ABSTRACT

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Show Title: Something in the Way

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The title of my thesis, *Something in the Way*, came to me only recently. It does address, however, my approach to photography in general, and my method for choosing subjects, as much as it addresses this particular body of work. Barriers of a literal and non-literal nature appear, often in the form of apathy or lassitude, impairing that subject's ability to achieve realization or actualization. People are depicted absorbed in thought or task, and a sense of ennui overshadows their existence. We cannot see into their thoughts, but we are informed of the subject's situation by the details of the setting: lying in a bed laden with suitcases, isolated in a motel room, a child in her room with a single overturned toy. Even as the images suggest an overshadowing or isolation, there is also present the possibility of transformation, and the grace of the subject itself is by no means suppressed. There is something in the

way an expression reveals or conceals thoughts, in the way the light falls, or in the way a gesture expresses elegance.

In large part, these images consist of portraits of my family and friends as well as the homes and interior spaces they occupy. Photographs of objects within the homes are significant for the meaning they hold for the owners as well as their implications for the viewer. Mundane human rituals interest me as well, and banal scenes like sitting around a table to eat, preparing food, smoking, or simply staring reflectively. There is an emotional distance between me and the subjects in many of the photographs. Within the framing and composition, there is often space around the subjects, allowing them to fill their environment and illustrate their absorption in a task or action. These images depict the subject apparently unaware of the presence of the camera and absorbed in a chore or thought. In most of the images the subjects aren't looking at the camera.

I am not following a documentary subject or creating a documentary body of work. Rather, my approach is to visually connect images, themes and motifs through the process of accumulation and then editing with these connections in mind. Although I don't utilize *tableau vivants* or staged scenes, it is not uncommon for me to place subjects in a scene or direct their actions. My thesis will further examine these issues.

INTRODUCTION

The photographs contained within my thesis exhibition were made over a two year period. My approach to the project began with my taking photographs of my daughter, dad and stepmother over Thanksgiving. During my time visiting over the holiday, I made several photographs of their home as well as portraits of my family members. Photographing my friends and family members made sense to me, as I often had access to them. I continued to photograph my daughter and friends over the next several months. Another impetus to photograph the people in my life came when I met my wife. She became a subject for me and I often was able to photograph her in our home or going about the routines of life. The dynamic around me and my environment was changed at this point, and I was able to take advantage of this change and make images of my spouse. I became more aware of the environments and the people that surrounded me, in part because some of them were new, my wife in particular, whom I'd only known for six weeks. I was curious, and sought to become familiar with and examine the way in which people inhabit their spaces.

Most of the exterior images, the landscapes and cityscapes, are cold and austere. Many of them were made in winter. I chose this season to be prominent for the reason that the harshness of the outside environment contrasted with the warmth, shelter and respite that the interior spaces provided. The mood and atmosphere within the photographs is one of quiet and stillness. The images mostly consist of portraits,

landscapes and personal possessions. The activities which the subjects are engaging in are banal, everyday tasks, or simply an inward self-reflection. There is a contemplative focus expressed by the subjects, and they are absorbed in a thought or task; a preoccupation belies their appearance.

The photographs in large part, however, are fictions. By that I mean I directed the subjects and placed them in the setting or environment conducive to my vision. The person may have been found in the room in which they are depicted, but often I placed them at a particular point in that room. This fictional device, and the concept that it employs, is made more evident with the editing and sequencing in which the photographs are placed. The narrative achieved in the sequence of the photographs is constructed in a way that weaves in and out of interiors and exteriors. These interior and exterior views are important to me, as this is a conceptual basis partly on which these photographs rest. The locations are not specific, there are no titles to the images, no reference to a particular city. The photographs of house exteriors are chosen for their conceptual theme of warm and cool, which is expressed often through color, such as a blue house with a red blooming tree. The red, or warm colors, are themes that appear throughout the images. The warmth depicted by a light, tree or shrub contrasts with the harshness of the environment and exterior, indicating the life that is present and existing even in a difficult climate. Throughout the sequence of photographs, the arrangement often depicts an exterior followed by an interior, giving the viewer the impression that they have entered the space depicted. However, it is not my intention to create a factual, documentary body of work. When arranging the sequence, I've chosen homes that are cold; often the cool light or cool color of the home

assigns it this value. Also present, however is an element of warmth, which can be an interior light or flowering tree. The presence of the warmth signifies the perseverance of the individual within the structure of a cold, isolating, austere environment, an environment which is shaped by the social structures of family and the isolation of the home. The photographs are *tableau vivants*, represented as truths.

APPROACH

The landscapes, cityscapes, buildings and exteriors were photographed concurrently with the portraits of the subjects. When I began making the photographs, I didn't envision what the project would become (at least not enough to try and direct in a particular direction), or the major threads and concepts that would emerge. My interest was in depicting people, primarily within their homes, and also photographing houses, which I understood as objects and structures. I continued to photograph the environment around me, including my own home and the people in it. While working on this body of work, I was also completing other projects and taking advantage of opportunities to photograph friends of mine and my family on the occasions that presented themselves, such as holiday visits which my daughter would spend with me. The rituals of the holidays provided opportunities for photographing activities like baking, lounging around the house, and recreational activities, such as playing board games.

ABSORPTION

All of the subjects within the photographs are engaged in an activity. Some of the activities may be a task or chore, while other times subjects may simply be absorbed in a thought or feeling. No matter the activity, the subject appears completely involved, to the point of being unaware of the presence of anyone else, including the photographer or by extension, the viewer. This fact is significant to my work for a couple of reasons. First, the effect created is somewhat cinematic. By this I refer to a parallel within theater of the fourth wall, in which the characters exist in their own world and don't look directly at or acknowledge the audience. The subjects' absorption is steadfast. Michael Fried quotes Philip-Lorca diCorcia on absorption, " 'One's interiority is not really perceivable at the surface,' diCorcia has remarked, a statement that his early portraits- if that is what are- seem intent on justifying. However it is a striking fact about those works that they do so by flirting with or at least alluding to the idea of absorption and/or reverie and the absorptive ideal of the subjects obliviousness to being beheld- as if their stagedness, their to-be-seenness, was given added point, made all the more self-evident, by virtue of that fact" (Fried 252).

The theme of absorption is also found in the paintings and work of Eric Fischl, which often depicts figures within narratives. As Ted Fullerton writes, " Fischl does not observe with innocent or chaste eyes, but instead responds to moments expressed through the body. *Three Figure Studies* (1994) in watercolor indicate the power of that response. These watercolors, directly executed, translate the figure beyond rendering,

and through gesture, elevate and empower it. Supported by light and tone, these elements of containment and release maintain the illusion of a three-dimensional form. Yet, its interpretation deals less with the objective observation than with a sense of the meeting of internal and external. In *Swimmer at Rest* (1995), the figure's unthinkable posture presses the allegorical; however, the face pulls us back by placing a personality, an identity on the figure" (Fullerton 16). For Fischl too, the gesture is significant and can reveal the gracefulness of a subject.

Another significance of the subjects depicted in absorption is the allusion to their situation. The subject is present and situated within an environment, most often an interior, and their surroundings become part of the portrait. The subjects' existence is inseparable from their environment. The objects that surround or engage, such as the coffee cup in the hand or on the table, the keyboard, the table they are gathered around for a Thanksgiving meal, are the codes and signifiers for the rituals that we, as a culture, undertake. However, the Thanksgiving meal, as illustrated in figure 1, shows the surrounding of walls and the enclosure of the home as a confined space. The decorations within the room inform us of the subject's status and background; antiques inhabit the space. I chose to photograph this scene at my father's house because it is the site where I often participate in this ritual and tradition. The objects hanging on the wall, though antiquated and decorative, hold meaning for him and my stepmother. The quiet, private view of a family, my family, sitting down for a Thanksgiving meal is not only a personal tradition, but also a shared, collective American tradition, inherited and carried on by one generation to the next. The codes, structure and significance of a family event, or holiday, are seemingly enacted out by members of a cast who are

performing their roles; the stage seems to be set, and each object and cast member is in place.



Figure 1, Scott Hubener, Something in the Way, 2009. C Print, 30"x40"

INTERIORITY/EXTERIORITY

Another comparison to the theatre or cinema would be the depiction of exteriors and interiors of homes and the objects within them, which, much like a stage, are set and ready for the action. The interiors, too, are also dressed and ready for the scene. However, the actors or characters seem to only somewhat fit the part. It's as if the curtain wasn't lifted entirely, or perhaps the understudies are now called in. The audience is left to fill in much of the story, action or decisiveness; the characters are possibly reconsidering their roles? The home is the setting where the action can play out, where roles, identities and dynamics come into being. However, many of the photographs depict only a single person, giving ambiguity to their role, as if they've decided against making any decision at all and question participating in the continuing dilemma of expectations. Often the subjects seem stuck or confined; the barriers and walls of the family structure, and the forced identity heaved upon them is burdensome. They in turn have up their own walls, barriers and defenses against being relegated and defined.

The interiority and exteriority of the houses is mirrored in that of the subjects as well. The houses are barriers, as they consist of walls and serve as containers. The home can both be a sanctuary but also an isolating object. Houses and shelters are meant to serve as protection, solace and comfort from the world and elements because they provide warmth, but they also require the presence of people and occupants to exist as a home. Often the home can seem as a tomb, cutting off the occupants from

the world. The family structure too seems to be complicit in this role of isolation and artificiality.

The subjects are depicted in a way that also reflects the interior and exterior relationship between the body and mind. The viewer is confronted with people whose thoughts, lives and experiences are unknown. Fried writes about the handling of this interior/exterior relationship in Philip-Lorca diCorcia's work, " So for example in a series of works from the 1980s diCorcia poses persons who ostensibly are unaware of being photographed in that they almost never gaze at the photographer and yet their posedness and absence of candor are never in doubt (Fried 250).

In contrast to diCorcia, my photographs depict more intimacy with my subjects. Whereas diCorcia treats his subjects in a more distanced and objective manner, I will move in closer to my subjects. Not only is the camera physically closer, but my emotional connection is closer and my aim is to depict that closeness and intimacy with the subject. The people depicted are my friends and my family, yet I am not present or viewable within the photographs. My position is examining a setting in which I too would typically be present. That closeness and intimacy is depicted in the close-up portrait of my daughter, her face dominating the frame. An ambiguous look graces her face, possibly melancholic or on the verge of tears, however, a slight smirk seems to be on her lips. The perspective is close and this is critical to depicting the subtlety of expression and physiognomy of the subject.



Figure 2, Scott Hubener, Something in the Way, 2011. C Print, 24"x30"



Figure 3, Scott Hubener, Something in the Way, 2010. C Print, 30"x40"

The exteriors are also represented by photographs of facades of houses, as well as the landscape. These literal exteriors are significant to the concept of the work. Homes are represented as both a sanctuary and shelter, as well as a barrier. The depicting of the outside of a house is important to me in order to provide another description of an exterior and facade. The vernacular style of architecture is chosen to serve as a pairing to the interiors depicted. The concept of homes was explored by the artist Dan Graham in his work *Homes for America*. Buchloh states, "The dialectic of

reality structure and formal structure, this capacity to read 'buildings and grammars,' or reality systems and formal systems, is most typical and significant of all of Graham's early writings and Conceptual works. It places them into a category of structure 'as simulacrum of the object of history' as Barthes has defined it" (Buchloh 181). Much like in the work of Graham, the houses in my photographs are found objects, extracted from their environment. The anonymity of the buildings is transformed into a setting and a personalized, occupied and perceived interior view because of the narrative, sequence and relationship that I establish through the work. The actual occupants of the houses' exteriors are unknown to me, however, by appropriating the image and inserting it into a pairing with another photograph, the connotation for the viewer is that they are entering the space depicted. The anonymity of the inhabitants of the houses I've depicted parallels the idea of knowing someone from their exterior appearance or the facade they put up for the world. The homes are of varying styles and degrees of modesty. These variations depended upon the homes where my family and friends reside. Some are more decorative and elaborate, such as the homes of my parents, while others, in particular of my friends, are less decorative and possess an understated quality. However, regardless of the architectural style, level of decoration or sophistication of the house structure, the theme of the home as a barrier or interior stage for family life and dynamics is not reliant or dependent on any particular class or specific socio/economical value; rather it seems to be a theme which is universal.



Figure 4, Scott Hubener, Something in the Way, 2010. C Print, 20"x20"



Figure 5, Scott Hubener, Something in the Way, 2010. C Print, 20"x20"

COLOR

Something in the Way consists entirely of color photographs. The use of color is important in the work I produce. It allows for a closer representation of the world, as the world exists in color, but also because color can be used as a subject within the photograph. Relationships between colors can exist within the photographs, which add another layer and meaning to the imagery. In the figure 6, the relationship is between the blue shirt and the pink wall behind the door gives a meaning and mood to the image. The color of the shirt is the subject here as much as the shirt itself. The color of the shirt is inseparable from the actual object, as with the wall and its color. The colors play off of each other and create a space for the viewer to go back and forth between the foreground, which contains the shirt and background with the wall. The shirt is a man's dress shirt in a blue hue and is set against a pink painted wall, which allows for the connotations of masculine and feminine color to enter the image.



Figure 6, Scott Hubener, Something in the Way, 2009. C Print, 30"x24"



Figure 7, Scott Hubener, Something in the Way, 2009. C Print, 20"x20"

An illustration of color for its warm and cool properties is found in Figure 7. The warm light from within the homes radiates through the window. The exterior is cool, the house is a "teal", and the light and sky are grey. The inclusion of both warm and cool colors within the image relate to the theme of warm and cool throughout the work. There are several photographs within the work in which color is used to connote cool or warm. A warm lamp next to a couch, which illuminates a child's doll, stands in contrast to the cool window directly behind it, veiled by a curtain but depicting the cool blue light

of the outside, which illustrates the warmth of the interior, this time from the perspective of being inside and looking out.



Figure 8, Scott Hubener, Something in the Way, 2009. C Print, 20"x20"

My work is influenced by photographers who work with color as a subject, most notably the photographs of William Eggleston. Eggleston also famously photographed his immediate environment in greater Memphis, which included photographs of his family, friends and relations and, "shows us pictures of aunts and cousins and friends, of houses in the neighborhood and in neighboring neighborhoods, of local streets and side roads, local strangers, odd souvenirs, all of this appearing not at all as it might in a social document, but as it might in a diary, where the important meanings would not be public and general put private and esoteric" (Eggleston, Szarkowski 10).

FORMAT

My exhibit consists of approximately 35 prints and a book. The photographs were made with medium and large format cameras, which are formats I chose because of their large negative size, which allowed for a high resolution image, conducive to enlarging, and because of the ratio of the negative. The Hasselblad yields a square image, a shape that is unique and atypical, and allows me to compositionally use the edge of the frame more deliberately. The detail and resolution that is within the negative and transferred to the large-scale prints is significant, because the minute detail within the image is important for the viewer to see, permitting smooth color gradations, clarity and pictorial sensibility. The textures of materials, clothes, and details in these large photographs allow the viewer to enter the space of the image. Some of the photographs are reproduced at a scale in which the subject is represented larger than life-size. The viewer can experience the photograph, as Alberro states in regard to Gursky's large scale photographs as, "taking on a pictorial grandeur and presence that phenomenologically engages the viewer" (Alberro 106).

The book is included in the exhibit as well, because the narrative and sequence of the images is most apparent and fixed in the book format. The experience of the book is quite different from viewing the prints, as the book is small in scale, measuring 8"x10". Therefore the detail of the large prints isn't present in the book. However, the advantage of the book is the viewers' ability to hold it in their hands and sit with it. The

book is an object and the reader can have a relationship and intimacy with the book that isn't possible with the photographic enlargements.

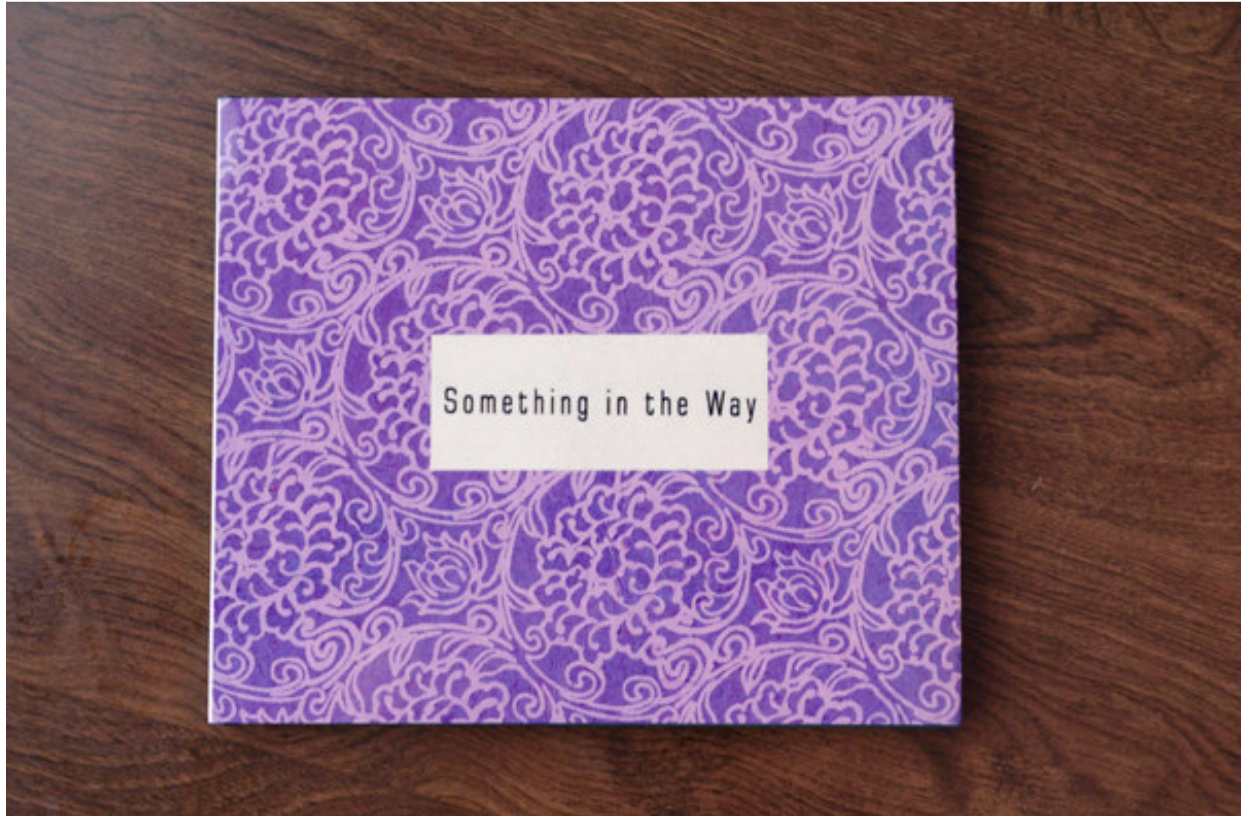


Figure 9, Scott Hubener, Something in the Way, 2011.



Figure 10, Scott Hubener, Something in the Way, 2011.

The prints on the gallery wall parallel the ones in the book for the most part. There are a couple of photographs from the book not included in the exhibit. These are the smaller format pictures, of which there are two featured in the book and which were made with a disposable camera and reproduced in a small scale. In the book, they serve as a segue, or detail to the other photographs, and don't read as well hanging in the gallery setting. My concern with the prints is primarily the ability of the audience to behold each individual photograph. There are a couple of deviations in sequence and selection from the hanging prints to the ones in the book. The purpose for this variation

was to allow the gallery exhibition to be its own presentation, and a somewhat varied experience from the book. The images in the book are fixed and sequenced in a way that is unchangeable. However, the gallery exhibition can vary slightly each time it is hung, which allows for a few changes and variations to the images, which in turn produce a unique experience and representation of the work. Images that are important as pairs within the book can be found in figure 10. The relationship between these two images on a page is fixed and to be read as a pair. The formal elements of the exterior building in the snow, paired with a similar form of the fireplace, illustrate a relationship and signify the warmth shelters provide. The image of the building is of cold and snow, and whites dominate the color palette, while the interior view of the fireplace is also dominated by white but also the source of warmth. This sequence exemplifies one of the themes within the work, that of interiority and exteriority.

There must also be something positive and transforming about the work. There are barriers in our lives, such as the walls and confines of our homes, or the exterior walls we put up around ourselves to guard our emotions and consciousness. But there is also something beautiful in the warm light from a window or porch, signifying an essence, a life, a spark. An elegant gesture by a little girl sitting on a chair, reaching for a nesting doll, imbues her world with life and grace. The balance, harmony and rhythm of life is reliant on this dichotomy, where the in-between moments become as significant as the momentous ones.

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